

Ethiopia-Eritrea 1999

Border Battles Continue

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The protracted conflict described in this article typifies in many respects the challenges facing us in the 21st Century. Here we see two Third World countries, ostensibly engaged in war based upon deep-seated enmity and conflicting interests. This conflict would remain an obscure border war but for the infusion of advanced technology by major powers needing to shore up their already stressed economies through military sales. Conflicts such as this can easily spill over into other nations in which U.S. interests lie, and will demand the commitment of U.S. forces. We must, therefore, examine and learn from these actions, and include the indigenous equipment and tactics in our contingency planning.

After their protracted fighting in 1998 failed to achieve any clear advantage, the Ethiopians and the Eritreans fell into a kind of trench warfare reminiscent of World War I—albeit with 1950s vintage weapons. For reference, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) will be referred to as the Eritrean Army and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) as the Ethiopian Army. By implication, both were once guerrilla forces, which might explain the horrendous casualties that were to be suffered by both sides.

Tensions on the border increased in late January and continued into February. An Eritrean administrator told a Reuters reporter that at least 55,000 Ethiopian troops had been massed across the border from the Eritrean town of Tsorona. On the heels of a 31 January statement by Eritrean President Issaias Afwerki that "Eritrea will never fire the first bullet," the Ethiopians claimed, at 1600 on 2 February, that

Eritrean guns shelled their units for 45 minutes on the Zalambessa front along the trunk highway between Addis Ababa and Asmara.

On 3 February, Ethiopia accused Eritrea of massing a division in Tsorona across the border from Axum and the industrial town of Adwa. At dawn on the 4th, Eritrea began continuous shelling along the Badme front and the next day, at 1045, of bombing Adigrat again. The fuel depot and surrounding areas were targeted.

On the 6th at 0600, the Ethiopians claimed to have captured a major Eritrean stronghold in a tank, artillery, and missile attack, with their enemies suffering heavy losses. The Eritreans denied being driven from their trenches, claiming that two Ethiopian brigades were completely routed and two more were severely battered in the attempt.

WEAPONS PURCHASES Prelude to Round 2

Despite a postponement due to Eritrean protests, in early September 1998, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu approved the sale of ten upgraded MiG-21B fighters to Ethiopia. The first plane was scheduled to be delivered in 1999. (Israel is upgrading 100 MiG-21s for Romania and the ten sold to Ethiopia will be replaced by ten Ethiopian MiGs in need of upgrading.)

In early December, it was reported that Russia would supply Ethiopia with \$150 million worth of used fighter planes, helicopters, and other military equipment that would be delivered later in the month. By mid-month, the Eritreans were reported to have acquired an unknown number of MiG-29 fighters at \$25 million each. The Russians had also reportedly sent 20 pilots to Asmara to train the Eritreans. As of 16 December, MiG-29s were reportedly flying over Asmara.

The fighting included helicopter gunship attacks, and the forces ended the fight with their lines roughly one mile apart.

On the 7th, the Ethiopians said that Eritrean units shelled targets in Adigrat, killing three civilians. They also claimed the destruction of an Eritrean radar station at 1745, five kilometers southeast of Adi Quala. The Eritreans countered that the report of Ethiopia's targeting of a radar station was a pure fabrication; the town proper was shelled, killing eight civilians, wounding 23, and demolishing ten houses. They also added that more than 250 Ethiopian troops were killed in action and 18 taken prisoner along the Mereb-Setit front.

On the 8th Ethiopia claimed that its fighter-bombers had backed up its artillery counteroffensive and were instrumental in the capture of towns on the Tsorona flank of the Alitena-Mereb front late in the day. Asmara in turn claimed that the Ethiopian 20th and 24th Divisions were badly battered in the same area, suffering 1,500 killed and 3,000 wounded.

Asmara repeated its assertions that the Ethiopians had enlisted foreign helicopter gunship and fighter aircraft pilot mercenaries, who were flying missions on the Mereb-Setit front. On the 9th Ethiopian planes bombed Deda (a small town that is home to 500 Eritreans deported from Ethiopia in Gash-Barka), killing five and wounding another five. At 0550 an Antonov high-altitude "bomber" (apparently a cargo plane field-modified to deliver ordnance) dropped at least four bombs and some incendiary flares, while Eritrean anti-aircraft guns opened up in retaliation.

This attack was followed by an Ethiopian MiG bombing run about two kilometers away.

The Eritreans showed journalists 100 Ethiopian prisoners at Tsorona (100 kilometers southwest of Asmara, 35 kilometers northwest of Zalambessa) and claimed 250 Ethiopians killed in action on the Badme front. They added that the Ethiopians had suffered heavy casualties, losing almost four brigades in the last three days of fighting on the Mereb-Setit front. Independent sources estimated that at least 4,000 troops from both sides had died in 48 hours of fighting. A United Nations special correspondent in New York estimated that more than 200,000 soldiers were involved in the conflict.

On the 10th, there were unconfirmed rumors in Asmara of a truce. Eritrean troops remained dug in on the Badme front. The next day, Addis Ababa called on Asmara to evacuate its civilians from the fronts and disregarded the UN appeal for an immediate cease-fire. The Ethiopian Foreign Minister declared that a truce would be possible only after the Eritrean troops withdrew from Ethiopian territory.

On the 12th, there were heavy artillery exchanges on the Zalambessa front. That same day, the Ethiopians announced that they had successfully completed the first phase of their plan with the control of the key military positions essential for up-coming missions and with the seizure of three "key strongholds, one along the Badme front and two others on the Tsorona front."

On the 13th, the Eritreans said that they had 22 Ethiopian deserters and 147 prisoners of war (some of whom they claimed were mere children). Meanwhile, Addis Ababa released 15 pilots of the Mengistu Haile Mariam regime who had been held in jail for "war crimes"—two generals (the former air force chief of staff and the former military commander of Asmara), as well as nine colonels, one major, two captains, and a lieutenant—all pilots of F5s, MiGs, Antonovs, or Mi-24 helicopters.

Early on the 14th, an Ethiopian Antonov bombed civilian targets on the Bure front line, 71 kilometers east of the port city of Assab. A large water

tanker was hit, a significant loss for such a dry area. At 0900 Asmara's anti-aircraft gunners managed to down an Ethiopian Hind on the same front, killing pilot and crew. Although Eritrean fighters took off from Asmara, there was no apparent air-to-air combat.

That evening, the Ethiopians claimed that an Eritrean company was completely destroyed as its battalion tried to recapture a fort. Earlier, they claimed the Eritrean command had been ejected from that fort by Ethiopian assault forces, cut off and surrounded at Gemahalo. Rescue efforts had failed to materialize and, with supplies running out, the veteran Eritrean Army commander had to consider surrendering with his troops.

On 16 February, Ethiopian Air Force MiG-23s bombed an Eritrean logistical support center. Heavy weapons, armored vehicles, military rations, and a huge water reservoir were destroyed. Eritrean military personnel suffered heavy losses.

After six days of fighting, Addis Ababa estimated that 7,000 Eritrean troops had been "put out of action" (4,000 troops, two tanks, three multiple launch rocket systems on the Badme front and the Tsorona front, 3,000 troops and four tanks as well as various artillery pieces and ammunition depots).

At dawn on the 21st, two Ethiopian Antonov bombers conducted a series of bombing raids on Assab's airport and city reservoir. The planes, forced to fly at high altitude because of Eritrean air defense artillery (ADA), dropped 12 bombs, but none hit their targets. That evening, the Antonovs returned to bomb a village outside Tsorona.

The Mereb-Setit front had been relatively quiet on the ground for the two weeks since the Ethiopian large-scale attacks on 6 and 7 February. Eritrean troops (with heavy artillery and tanks) dug in on the high ground along the 100-kilometer front. The fortifications of lumber, concrete, and steel had an average thickness of 45 centimeters.

On the 22nd, Ethiopian MiGs conducted an intensive, though ineffective, day-long air bombardment on the Mereb-Setit front and Tsorona flanks. The next day, the Ethiopians opened a

barrage at 0430 and, an hour later, two Antonovs dropped bombs near Eritrean Mereb-Setit front trenches. Nine of their T-55s were destroyed and two captured during an 0700 assault, according to Asmara. Ethiopia subsequently summoned more air support, but the MiG-23 fighters turned back after Eritrean resistance. The Ethiopian offensive would later be described as a World War I-style assault (Addis Ababa also opened a "feeble" attack on the Tsorona front around 1000).

Intense fighting continued into the afternoon of the 24th, with Eritrea claiming 22 Ethiopian T-55s destroyed and one captured, while their ADA units brought down one of Ethiopia's Mi-24s behind Asmara's lines.

Ethiopia apparently bled off units from other fronts to mass an attack on the Badme front. The Eritreans claimed that their enemy had deployed six divisions, two of which were completely routed in the attacks.

On the 25th, Ethiopia claimed that one of its SU-27s had shot down an Eritrean MiG-29 (rumored to be piloted by the Eritrean Air Force commander) in a dogfight over the Badme front. (The other five or six MiG-29s were piloted by Ukrainian or Eastern European mercenaries.) This was followed the next day with the claim of a second Eritrean MiG-29 shot down.

After four days of fighting, an Eritrean presidential adviser told the press that Ethiopian "human wave attacks" had broken through a defensive position south of Badme on the 60-kilometer front. The Ethiopians then infiltrated units through the penetration and rolled up Eritrean lines from behind.

Dug-in Eritrean tanks facing south (where an Ethiopian counteroffensive was anticipated) were flanked, and Eritrean commanders reportedly tried to reinforce the front-line by mobilizing troops from other fronts. Ethiopian jets and gunships struck at units and supply points behind the front, paralyzing any moves by their enemy.

Addis Ababa claimed that 50,000 Eritrean troops were "put out of action," while Eritrean official sources claimed the Ethiopians had lost more than 9,000 dead and 12,000 wounded.

Eritrea described this decision to withdraw as a move to preserve their military manpower and hardware, adding, "Ethiopia has made this advance at great human and military cost. We have left our position with our forces intact and have taken up new positions."

On the 27th, Ethiopian planes dropped four napalm bombs on an all but empty town 30 kilometers from Badme, destroying 150 homes. That night, Eritrean officials agreed before the UN Security Council to accept the only peace plan on the table, which Ethiopia had already approved.

On the last day of the month, Ethiopia declared a "total victory" over Eritrea. A government statement said that Ethiopian troops had overrun 100 kilometers of heavily fortified trenches, dealing the Eritrean army a "monumental and humiliating defeat."

Eritrea countered that it had killed 14,000 Ethiopians since fighting began 22 days earlier, more than 9,000 since February 23. Asmara described Ethiopia's victory statement as "boasting and lies" and said that its own forces had foiled an Ethiopian offensive on the Mereb-Setit front.

Ethiopia lashed out at the United Nations on 1 March, stating that it would not accept the UN Security Council Resolution that "demanded an immediate halt to the hostilities, in particular the use of air strikes," or the one that "strongly urges all states to end immediately all sales of arms and munitions to Ethiopia and Eritrea."

The Organization of African Unity (OAU) mission, expected to begin in Asmara on 3 March, was postponed.

The March Offensives

Asmara claimed that the Ethiopian Army suffered a devastating defeat in the Alitena-Mereb sector of the Tsorona front in the battles that ran from 14 March until 0900 on the 16th: More than 10,000 Ethiopian soldiers were killed, 57 tanks and scores of other military vehicles destroyed, six tanks captured, and one MiG-23 shot down.

Repeated Ethiopian attacks took place throughout the 15th and into the night, and "thousands of its troops fell like leaves." Asmara claimed another 25 tanks destroyed (bringing that campaign's total to 44 destroyed and two captured).

Reminiscent of tales from the Italo-Ethiopian War, 63 years earlier, the Ethiopians supposedly forced 5,000 of their own villagers to carry ammunition up to the front on pack animals and their own backs, some of whom became casualties.

The Eritreans also accused the Ethiopian regime of denying that any fighting was taking place at all and later qualifying it as "routine shelling and skir-

An Eritrean military spokesman estimated that "some 10,000 Ethiopian soldiers were killed and 57 tanks destroyed in three days of fighting at the Tsorona front." He said, "The figure represents what we think is probably a low-end calculation."

Early on the 19th and continuing into the 20th, Ethiopian and Eritrean forces continued to clash in the Mereb River vicinity west of the Zalambessa-Egala front, where fierce fighting had been raging for several days.

An official Ethiopian statement issued on the night of the 19th accused Eritrea of paying only lip service to its acceptance of the OAU peace plan for resolving the border dispute "after it was forcibly evicted from Badme."

According to the terms of the OAU framework agreement, "Eritrean troops are required to withdraw from all occupied territories. This is what they were required to do 10 months ago, and it is what they still need to do."

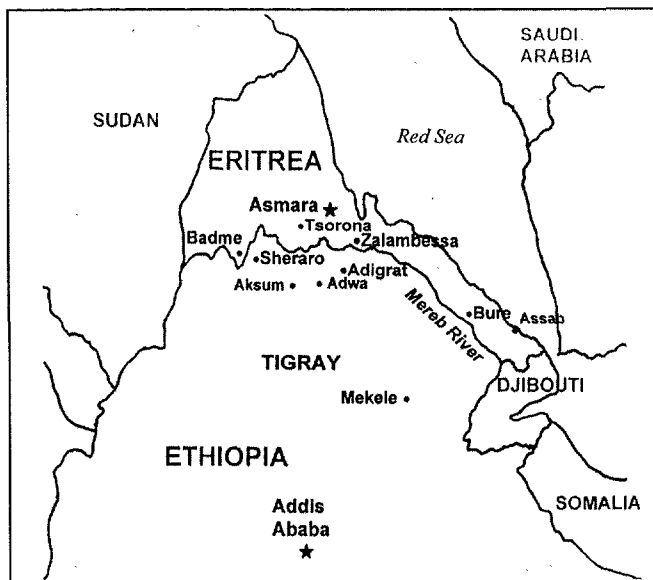
The Eritreans said that their forces shot down an Ethiopian MiG-23 over the Badme front on 21 March (as well as destroying two tanks), which the Ethiopian government denied.

Ethiopia claimed on the 28th that its troops had inflicted "heavy losses" on Eritrean

forces during the latest two fierce battles on two fronts this month. They claimed that nearly 23,000 Eritrean forces had been put out of action and a total of 51 tanks destroyed during the engagements of 13-16 March and 17-26 March, respectively.

On the Zalambessa-Igala front, more than 9,000 Eritrean troops were put out of action, 36 tanks were destroyed along with three batteries (each containing four or five long-range heavy artillery pieces), from 13 to 16 March.

During the Mereb River fighting, 13,700 Eritrean forces were killed, wounded, or captured, according to Addis Ababa, as well as 15 tanks, a large ammunition depot, and two batteries of long-range heavy artillery. Four tanks were also captured.



mishes." Ethiopian sources denied the Eritrean victory, defining their own withdrawal as a tactical maneuver.

An Ethiopian Mi-35 gunship attempting to strafe Eritrean positions along the Mereb-Setit front sustained slight damage from Eritrean antiaircraft fire on the 18th, which forced it down behind Eritrean defense lines.

The Eritreans also said that four Ethiopian tanks were destroyed and two captured during 17-18 March. Three Ural trucks carrying ZU-23 antiaircraft guns were also destroyed.

During the same period, Asmara noted that Ethiopian Antonov bombers, MiGs, and helicopter gunships bombed two civilian districts, allegedly in retaliation for the heavy defeat on the Tsorona front.

On the 28th, the Ethiopians claimed that their air force shot down two Eritrean MiG-29s and that they captured hundreds of mortars, antiaircraft and antitank weapons and medium-range heavy artillery, and thousands of light and medium armaments, as well as several food and ammunition supply depots. The greatest claim was ten batteries of long-range heavy artillery.

Also in late March, the Ethiopians alleged that Asmara planted about 110,000 antipersonnel mines and more than 10,000 antitank mines near its trenches in Badme and some parts of Sheraro. The Ethiopians also claimed that the mines were as much to prevent Eritrean desertions as to stop Ethiopian troops but that an Ethiopian engineering unit had managed to clear breaches.

On 15 April the ceasefire collapsed when Ethiopian fighter planes attacked three military bases 50 to 60 kilometers from the border, including an army base and a fuel depot. Successive raids between 1230 and 1300 were described as "high altitude bombings and indiscriminate." The Eritrean government condemned the attack for deliberately targeting civilians.

Two weeks later, Ethiopia launched an air raid against Eritrea using two Antonov planes escorted by fighter jets. On 28 April, the Ethiopian planes violated Eritrean air space to "bomb nomadic grazing areas along the Binbina-Kuluk road in western Eritrea," according to the Eritreans. They claimed that the air raid was deliberately timed to coincide with the visit of a UN special envoy to the region.

Another series of raids were launched by Addis Ababa two weeks later. On the morning of 14 May, Ethiopian MiGs targeted an Eritrean logistic center and a mechanized unit on the Zalambessa front, causing "heavy damage" and returning to their base without suffering any losses to ADA fire.

The next morning, five Ethiopian MiG-3s targeted Massawa's port and naval base, and a mobile oil depot. Asmara claimed that only a warehouse containing tires was hit. While Addis Ababa claimed that the raid heavily damaged targets in the city, western

journalists said that the port was untouched. Speaking from Cairo, Eritrean President Afwerki dismissed the Ethiopian air raid as a show of force in response to the mediation efforts.

At 2130 local time on the 16th, the Ethiopian Air Force Antonovs launched an attack on a weapons depot near Shambuko, about 25 kilometers from the border. The Ethiopians claimed heavy damage to Eritrean heavy artillery stored in the warehouse, as well as several trucks used as prime movers. This would be excellent damage assessment for a night raid. The raid was presumably scheduled to lessen the effectiveness of Eritrean antiaircraft fire, and the Antonovs returned safely.

The next outbreak of fighting was in late May, with predictable conflicting statements from both sides. An Ethiopian division-sized attack launched on the central flank of the Mereb-Setit front on 21 May was foiled after four days, according to Asmara, with 380 killed, 975 wounded, and 11 captured. The Ethiopian statement said that fighting began on 22 May, when four Eritrean brigades attacked Ethiopian positions, resulting in 400 Eritrean soldiers dead and 1,500 wounded near the River Mereb. An Ethiopian Hind helicopter was downed on the 24th.

Three weeks later, the Ethiopian army launched what appeared to be a diversionary attack on the Bure front of the 1,000-kilometer border, then committed two full divisions to an assault on the central flank of the Mereb-Setit front line on the 11th. Eritrean forces claim to have killed or wounded 12,210 Ethiopian soldiers in three days of fighting. The Ethiopians claimed to have killed or wounded 7,800 Eritreans during the same period.

Eritrea claimed four Ethiopian MiG fighters in two fierce border battles, including two MiG-23s downed on the Mereb-Setit front with surface-to-air missiles. Ethiopia denied the losses.

Both sides had tried to gain the initiative before the rainy season, when further advances would be impossible. The pattern of two weeks between air attacks indicated Ethiopian probes of and softening attempts on Eritrean de-

fenses. The same pattern during the ground assaults was probably due to logistical limitations. Clearly, both sides needed to reload.

By the end of June, Eritrean units had moved forward (up to six kilometers) all along the hilly, 50-kilometer, U-shaped Mereb-Setit front.

An Uncertain Future

Up to this point, the efforts of African neighbors, the UN, and the United States had failed to settle the dispute. But with the rainy season fast approaching in July, both sides became more willing to return to negotiations.

During the last week of June, a Libyan deputy minister in charge of African Affairs shuttled between the two capitals until a settlement plan was negotiated. On 3 July, the Libyan press reported that Ethiopia and Eritrea had stopped all military operations as a prelude to signing a cease-fire agreement.

Nevertheless, border tension, punctuated by occasional skirmishing and shelling, continued into the fall, with diplomacy making no headway and with the war threatening to spread. Ethiopian forces pushed into southern Somalia to get at Eritrean rebels allied with Somali warlord Hussein Aidid. Eritrea had sent Oromo Liberation Front rebels, along with shipments of arms and munitions, to Aidid, but skirmishing in this area quickly cooled.

By October the entire border had stagnated and more Ethiopians along the front were dying from disease than from bullets. While the Ethiopians held the town of Badme and were in defensive positions, near Zalambessa the front lines were only 200 meters apart, and the Ethiopians were prepared to take the town.

To date, there is no solution to this conflict, and the skirmishing continues.

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